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NATO Considers U.S. Spy Plane

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Washington Post Foreign Service

BRUSSELS, Dec. 9--The defense ministers of the North Atlantic Alliance agreed in principle here today that a new American-built radar-surveillance plane is needed to help defend Europe against air attack, U.S. government officials said.

But the defense ministers stopped short of pledging to buy the expensive and controversial American plane until more is known about how well it will work.

That decision, according to U.S. and Allied officials alike, will not be made before the next meeting of NATO's top-level defense-planning group next summer.

The final decision by the NATO allies on whether to buy 20 of the airborne warning and control planes -- perhaps at a cost of \$60 million each -- looms as one of the most important decisions on an international weapon system of recent years.

The European decision may well be indirectly linked to large-scale American purchases of foreign weapons and to joint U.S.-European arms-production projects.

For example, the Pentagon

is studying purchase of several hundred more British-built Harrier attack jets, and a decision to go ahead could be linked with British support for the American plane. The British, however, are among those most wary about whether the plane is worth the price.

The West Germans are intensely interested in a future joint tank-production program with the United States and perhaps Britain. This would involve taking the best features of West Germany's highly regarded Leopard 2 tank and of new American models and producing a common version that could be used by NATO allies.

The Americans have dominated the arms-sale market to NATO for years. Now the Europeans are demanding reciprocal American purchases.

For the Pentagon, a favorable European decision on the American plane may save the project at home. The U.S. Air Force currently plans to buy 34 of the planes at a total cost of some \$4 billion. But since they are meant to defend Europe, Congress wants the Europeans to buy as many as 20 of the big jets,

whose huge radars are supposed to warn of a Warsaw Pact air attack.

The West Germans, in particular, want the project financed as a NATO effort since all would presumably benefit from the plane, if it works. It is still viewed in some quarters as vulnerable to jamming by Soviet equipment, thus blinding its electronic eyes.

The first day of the two-day session here was dominated by the issue of trying to standardize the vast array of weapons of the 15 NATO countries. About \$10 billion to \$15 billion a year is believed to be wasted now by duplication.

While all parties recognize the value of the Allies fighting with the same weapons, ammunition and fuel, the issue is politically hot because of the potential threat to the armaments industries in various NATO states.

The French, who are still part of the Atlantic alliance but dropped out of the military alliance almost 10 years ago, indicated a willingness yesterday to take part in joint European arms-production discussions. But they want those talks outside NATO.

The French move presents something of a dilemma for the United States and NATO. While the United States welcomes the French willingness to get closer to European defense, the organization would exclude the United States.

This is viewed as unrealistic by some here who believe that American competition would drive down the price of new arms. Other NATO officials fear that the French demand for a new organization will weaken the NATO structure.

Privately, American officials hope that the French move also means that the government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing is moving closer in coordinating military doctrine with NATO. A number of officials believe that the French president would like to do that but faces problems with Gaullists and Communists who want no closer military commitment to NATO.

The defense ministers also received a NATO report on the East-West power balance noting that the Soviets may be beginning to expand their African presence to oil-rich Nigeria.

The report said that for the first time since the 1970 Nigerian civil war, Russian naval ships recently made port calls in that country. The report added that the Russians have delivered several jet fighter-bombers, known by the NATO code-name "Fishbed," to Nigeria.

**Rep. Schneebeli
Won't Run Again**

United Press International

Rep. Herman T. Schneebeli (R-Pa.), the ranking GOP member on the House Ways and Means Committee, announced yesterday he has decided against seeking reelection next year.

Schneebeli, 68, an eight-term veteran from Williamsport, said in a statement: "My decision is based on my desire to spend more time with my family. The time has now come when I believe that Mrs. Schneebeli and I are entitled to relax a little and to experience the joy of watching our grandchildren grow and mature."